

## IRIS MURDOCH'S TREATMENT TO HOMOSEXUALITY AND GAY CHARACTERS

**RICHA TRIPATHI**

Department of English, Galgotias College of Engineering and Technology, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

### ABSTRACT

Iris Murdoch's successful novels, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974), *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987), *The Bell* (1958) and *The Black Prince* (1973) combine the elements of realism and allegory to create a commentary on the moral inadequacy of the homosexuals and how much society do justice with them. Although Murdoch's central theme covers human existence in a larger perspective, in which homosexuality is one of her major concern to enlighten and to change the outlook of the society. This study deals with the existing difficulties of homosexuals and charges against their discarded sexuality which is considered unethical, amoral and prevented by the society. This research teaches that sexuality is not a criterion to be judgmental about individual's character, personality, nature, beliefs and attitude. This study not only discusses the severity of their problem but also discusses the solution of it. Individuals, at personal level and society, at major level can solve this enigma together.

**KEYWORDS:** Iris Murdoch, Sexuality, Homosexuality, Morality, Love, Marriage, Society

### INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch is reputed female British author, who is well known for her strong representation of views in her personal life as well as in her writings. Her central themes of the novels explore human life and its different elements, whereas her sub-plots cover some unseen but serious issues like gender discrimination, injustice done to homosexuals, domestic violence and teen pregnancy. This study of Murdoch's novels discusses a rapidly rising issue of homosexuality which is the cause of turmoil in the personal, marital, religious, biological, intellectual and social domains all over the world. Homosexuality has become the unsolved issue for heartbreaking partition and separation in many families, communities, churches, work environments, societies etc. Here the discussion unveiled Murdoch's treatment to homosexuality and gay characters in personal, social and religious context with the help of her five major novels.

#### **A Fairly Honorable Defeat**

*A Fairly Honorable Defeat* chooses to portray the hell realm of contemporary life of a Post Christian era when traditional moral values and social institutions have lost their meaning. Plot moves around the impish activities of Prof. Julius Kin who tries to create confusion among three married couples, two heterosexual couples Tallis and Morgan, Rupert and Hilda and the third couple Simon, Rupert's brother and Axel, the homosexual pair. Julius succeeds in destroying Hilda and Rupert's marriage but could not break homosexual bond between Simon and Axel due to their devotion of maintaining truth, love and faith.

Simon and Axel Nilsson come to wish Hilda and Rupert on their twentieth marriage-anniversary party. Hilda raises a question mark on the stability on their gay marriage. Hilda's view about homosexuality is the reflections of the majority of the society, who are infected by prejudge mental tendencies about their sexuality. In that period,

homosexuality was considered as an immoral, unnatural criminal offence, which was not acceptable for religious communities, ruling authorities and legal institutions. But very few people like Rupert believe in his own intuition who quotes that being homosexual does not determine a man's whole character any more than being heterosexual does. For Rupert man's character is more important than his sexuality. It reflects that with the help of her honest married homosexual characters, Murdoch wants to guide her readers to develop a sense of logical, justified and mature observation towards homosexuals like Rupert. As Dorothy states that "Heterosexuality is not normal, it's just common."<sup>1</sup>

Introducing Axel and Simon as a married couples in her novel clearly reflects her favour to give them equal human and marital rights like heterosexuals. Like a husband, Axel has lectured to Simon. "Don't tell me lies, even trivial once, and don't conceal things from me. Love should be without fear." Like an ordinary husband and wife, Axel and Simon also have issues to deal with patience and generosity. Peter by condemning Axel-Simon relationship voices the traditional social view against homosexuality. He tells Axel, "You keep your relationship with Simon a dark secret, don't you! oh you let us know because we're your so called dear friends and we 're discreet. You can rely on us to tell lies on your behalf. But you'd die if everyone knew. You would be ashamed!" But Axel's reply is "I would not be ashamed".<sup>2</sup> The heated argument between them reveals a dark hidden truth that homosexuals are ready to disclose their sexual identity but society is not ready yet to accept them as the natural part of the whole social system. Axel is ready to reveal his sexual orientation and also aware about this fact that society is not ready to give them a scope to live peacefully. Alfred Bruce Douglas once commentes, "I am the Love that Dare not Speak its Name."<sup>3</sup> Rejection, ignorance and secrecy cannot omit reality, it's just develops a sense of negligence among people. Here we find a courageous homosexual married couple moving in society and their relationship is known and tolerated by the diplomatic people. Murdoch makes us feel that they are like other married couples and they deserve for fair chances and equal treatment. Their attachments, fears and love are all same like heterosexuals. Murdoch demands from society to treat them equally and normally as they treat heterosexuals.

In spite of being a grey character Julius gives a true remark, "Few people just want other people to be happy. Most of us prefer our friends in tears. If by any unusual chance anyone does want others to be happy, he in variably wants them to be so as a result of his own bush bodying." Just to prove himself true he plans a fatal conspiracy against both couples of Hilda and Rupert with Axel and Simon. Julius invites Simon into his flat secretly in the absence of Axel by taking an excuse of Axel's birthday. There, Simon finds Morgan locked in a complete naked situation. Due to help Morgan, Simon gives his clothes to her. Julius finds Simon completely undressed. Julius starts to blackmail Simon. In fear, Simon doesn't dare to tell the truth to Axel. About love Julius remarks, "Human loves don't last Simon, they are far for too egoistic." (p.269). A small suspicion makes them imagine all the details of other's insincerity. Julius tells Simon, "A necessary ingredient in a happy marriage is the ability to tell soothing lies to your partner." (p.171) But the soothing lies of Rupert makes the channels of his communication with his wife Hilda blocked. On the other hand, Tallis thinks marriage to be "a symbolic blood relationship." (p.214) Hilda demands for divorce from Rupert under the influence of hatred, jealousy and unfaithfulness but on the other side Simon decides to tell the whole truth and proves Julius completely wrong. Simon's confession to Axel saves their relationship. Hendrik Hertzberg truly remarks that "Marriage should be between a spouse and a spouse, not a gender and a gender."<sup>4</sup>

Through Simon-Axel relationship Murdoch is attempting to prove that sometimes homosexual love can be more powerful than the heterosexual love because love is purely love and it should not differentiated based on sexuality. Axel-Simon relationship is able to bear the onslaughts of Julius's cunningness. Murdoch has already conceded that the

only serious and important objection to homosexual marriages is that it is essentially unstable.<sup>5</sup> the concession to homosexual marriage in this novel should not be considered a final judgment. Even in case of Simon and Axel marriage, the instability is admitted, examined and portrayed with sensitive respect for their individuality. Homosexual relations run more hazards of 'an external social kind.' The stability of heterosexual relation is expected due to the institution of marriage and procreation of children and the growth of society. Murdoch is pointing out that if persons suit each other they can stay together whether they are heterosexual or homosexual.

### **The Sacred and Profane Love Machine (1974)**

Iris Murdoch in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974) shows the true picture of the society and puts the question mark that where justice stands in the materialistic modern world for homosexuals. The "Sacred and Profane" of the title would then refer to the different kinds of love and their varying degrees of what might be termed legitimacy.

The story revolves around a triangle love between heterosexuals, Blaise Gavander, a successful psychotherapist, his devoted wife Harriet Gavander and his selfish mistress Emily McHugh. As the novel advances, Harriet tries to adjust with Emily. But a homosexual character, Edgar strongly objects her action to be too devoted to her husband and his mistress in spite of their treachery. He points out that her actions support evilness and a disgrace to goodness because 'an accomplice of evil' by being so supportive to evil doers. He tries to correct her: "Because you are good you think that you can save them, but it is they who will defile you. You must not assent to what is wrong that is not what the Gospel requires. You are believer in Christian marriage. One must be in the truth and you are not. You must come away so that he can see what he has done. As it is, he sees nothing. This is a lie, this man's a lie, and he must live it and undo it. But you have put him in a position where he cannot stop lying. No one here, not even you, is good enough to redeem this thing. They will not tolerate your forgiveness, in the end they will hate you for it, they will go on intriguing as they have always done, they will find too late that you have not been a healer, but an accomplice of evil. He must decide, he must choose, that is where he has put himself. He has not acknowledged his fault, he is continuing in it, and you will be eternally his victim, abandoning him to wicked ways and conniving at his sin. For his sake you must not allow this foul thing to continue. You have not required the truth of him. You must require him to decide. Vague tolerant pity is not true kindness here. You are trying to spare yourself."<sup>6</sup>

Edgar's attack is double edged. As moral beings man must act boldly to combat evil. For him to tolerate wrong is also sinful. It is Harriet's duty to acknowledge the truth. However, she still persists with her illusion that whatever she had done so far was out of a desire. Blaise decides to live with Emily rather than with Harriet. Edgar's observation is proved true by Blaise's decision that phony people can never do justice with the good people. In agony, she tries to woo Monty and then Edgar but fails. Rejected by Blaise, Monty and Edgar, she killed in a terrorist attack to have saved the life of Luca by protecting him from bullets. Murdoch points out through Harriet that good people always follow the path of goodness and morality. Goodness is a choice of an individual. Someone's sexuality does not play any role to determine one's goodness or evil.

### **The Bell (1958)**

One of Iris Murdoch's most successful novels, *The Bell* (1958) portrays the impact of religion and homosexuality where homosexuality is not permissible since the start. The sub-plot deals with a love triangle between very religious homosexuals, Michael Meade, the leader of a religious community, Nick and Toby, young fellows who joins church for

religious retreat. In spite of struggling with his homosexual tendencies, Michael is aware about his religious duties and ultimate objective to follow, he explains, "Our duty is not necessarily to seek the highest, regardless of the realities of our spiritual life as it in fact is, but to seek that place, that task, those people, which will make our spiritual life most constantly grow and flourish."<sup>7</sup>

Murdoch here tries to highlight the inner struggle of religious priests who are spiritual and religious by soul and homosexual and humanistic by heart. No religion is liberal enough to accept it as a natural choice of human being. Although it never occurs to him that his sexual habits could ever clash with his religion but he instead feels: "Indeed in some curious way the emotion which fed both erose deeply from the some source." (p.99) Later, when the conception of becoming a priest turns into a reality, Michael tries to give-up this practice and get rid of the guilt which had made his prayers "incoherent moments of emotion" and later comes to believe that he is a favorite of God and a man with "a definite destiny." (p.82) He tries to be very optimistic about what god has gifted him and believes that the impersonal world is concerned about him and directs events for his benefit. Some critics feel that Michael is a near-saint, defeated by trying for more than is possible. He comically finds that it is his force of personality that holds the community together. For him religion does not really come from outside himself. In his Sunday sermon he says, "Each one of us apprehends a certain kind and degree of reality and from this springs our power to live as spiritual beings; and by using and enjoying what we already know we can hope to know more." (p.204)

He fails to realize that religious concentration and observance are inadequate to make one rise above the confusion of sex and the flaws of love. In spite of prayer and religious rigors; he tries to check his homo-sexual affair with Toby Gashe. The ease with which this deception occurs suggests that a subjective sense of sincerity is a poor substitute for self-knowledge as a moral guide. Perhaps Frank Kermode is right in describing Michael as an "accumulator of disaster".<sup>8</sup> Once again he is entrapped between social, religious and moral values from one side and desires of an "individual" or "self" from other side.

On the contrary, James, the head of religious community nurtures that type of the religious life, governed by unquestioning obedience to rigid rules, strictly followed under all conditions "Truthfulness is enjoined, the relief of suffering is enjoined, adultery is forbidden, sodomy is forbidde These are rules by which we should freely judge ourselves and other too." (p.132) James has completed opposite attitude towards life from Michael. Ethics for him is a matter of unthinking rules and duties. Living conventionally by outward rules is must for him because he believes whole-heartedly in God. He wants to judge others and wants to be judged by them in the light of religiously "enjoined" and religiously "forbidden" rules. He links religious faith with absolute morality, for him, religion comes from outside. James considers Nick as "pansy" and Dora as a "bitch". When Toby makes confession of his homosexual flirtation with Michael, James judges the whole matter in the light of conventional morality. He thinks that Nick has done only one good act by sending Toby to make confession in the later part of the novel. He feels Michael has broken the known rules so no good can be done to this community. Ultimately James and the Abbess decide to dissolve the community. He realizes how easily the individual falls in to a moral and psychological morass once he deviates from the simple rules like those in the Bible. His moralistic living makes him the undeclared leader at Imber Court. With conventional morality and rules, James can't have any intimate relationship with anybody.

James's views are in the favor of the society and Michael's views are in the favor of the freedom of individuals. For James: "the chief requirement of the good life is to live without any image of oneself." (p.131) and according to

Michael: "one should have some conception of one's capacities." (p.200) He goes to say, "Each one of us has his own way of apprehending God.... Each one of us apprehends a certain kind and degree of reality and from this springs our power to live as spiritual beings: and by using and enjoying what we already know we can hope to know more." (p.204)

For James, sodomy is not deplorable, it is forbidden. But for Michael, it is important to know how and why it is deplorable. He justifies his homosexual tendencies, "God had made him so and he did not think that God had made him a monster." (p.205) Michael endorses Milton's viewpoint that "Knowledge of good requires knowledge of evil: they are inseparable and can only be distinguished if we know them both."<sup>9</sup> Alex Sanchez mentioned once that "the church should just stay out of people's pants."<sup>10</sup> Murdoch herself favours that, "We fear plurality, diffusion, senseless accident, chaos, we want to transform what we cannot dominate or understand in to something reassuring and familiar, into ordinary being, into history, art, religion, science."<sup>11</sup>

No human being can live in this world without love. Nick has lost Michael and in remorse he commits suicide. After Nick's death, Michael accepts worldly responsibilities once again and picks another job for himself. Peter Conradi argues the "the ending of the book asserts the triumphant survival of personality, the devious tenacity and the resilience of the self."<sup>12</sup>

### **The Book and the Brotherhood (1987)**

*The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) is the twenty third novel of Iris Murdoch, first published in 1987 depicted on the surface, civilized and well educated characters move about in theoretical freedom, working out their destinies according to the dictates of reason and plausibility.

*The Book and the Brotherhood* fictionalizes the welter of contemporary lives of the group of Oxford intellectuals and their breakdown of coherent religious and moral structures. Morality demands sacrifices of human kind because it is not an easy task to be ethical and charming at the same time in a rigid social structure. All the friends like, Gerard, Rose and Jenkin simply refer to themselves as the Gesellschaft or Brotherhood starts to doubt or Crimond, "He doesn't care about deprived people or social justice, he doesn't go anywhere hear the real working class struggle, he's a self obsessed theorist, he makes abstract web he's wearing."<sup>13</sup>

Gerard, the natural leader of the brotherhood, is very keen about Crimond's book. He is highly intelligent, cultivated and sensitive man, reasonably successful in the world. But in Murdoch's world only the doer of good can be the real hero. Only Jenkin Rederhood, Gerard's friend is the real hero in the novel, whose "goodness" shows in his actions not only in words as Gerard does. It proved through their conversation and actions: Jenkin says to Gerard, "You think you are on a ladder going up, and you do go up", Jenkin says. Gerard replies, "You think you're on a road going on and you do go on." "You can't by pass where you are by an imaginary leap into the ideal Alright, but it's better to have an ideal rather than just trudging on and thinking how different we all are" Jenkin remarks. (p.110)

Murdoch clearly locates virtue in the road and the trudging rather than the ladder and the leap. The same distinction recurs much later in another exchange between Gerard and Jenkin. He says, "Don't walk so fast, Gerard. I'm just a practical chap; it's you who are religious. Yes, we keep telling each other, we do see life differently. I see it as a journey along a dark boggy road with a lot of other chap. You see it as a solitary climb up a mountain, you don't believe you'll get to the top, but you feel that because you can think of it you've done it. That's the ideal that takes you all the way." (p.246.)

Gerard replies with some dark reference to things looking like death up there which Jenkin characterizes as romantic myth. Gerard comes back with the conclusion, "I believe in goodness, you believe in justice." (p.247), Due to Jenkin's extreme goodness and pure morality, Gerard starts love him. He expresses his erotic and homosexual love to Jenkin, "it's a declaration of love."<sup>14</sup> But Jenkin lives for the welfare of the society; Gerard fails to notice it. Jenkin wants to solve the problems and to remove the sufferings of others who become victim of circumstances like Violet's illegitimate daughter, Tamar who wants to study but because of her mother's demand of money.

Tamar comes to Jenkin saying she needs help, extreme help, and as he talks to her, telling her to think it all out, the telephone rings and Jean desperately appeals for help too. She has discovered Crimond's sinister note in Duncan's desk, suspects a challenge to a duel in agony, rings Gerard and gets no answer, rings Jenkin and appeals to him to go at once to Crimond and find out if there is any danger. Jenkin's immediate answer is "Yes, Yes, I'll go at once, don't worry... I'll fly now." (p.454) Jenkin's reaction proves that he is a man of action and extreme goodness. Jenkin's goodness and devotion is for the society but he recognized that without the transformed heart, no amount of structural change can really bring about change when "the exploiter and victim merely change places then justice'll be done."<sup>15</sup> Telling Tamar to stay till he returns, he hurries out looking for a taxi. He never comes back. He goes down to the basement of his flat where the deadly game arranged by the suicidal Crimond is being played. The bullet, fired by Duncan and meant by Crimond for himself, hits Jenkin as he opens the door at the crucial moment and appears in the doorway, and he slumps down dead-killed by accident.

Like Jesus Christ, Jenkin 'a Christ figure' is cheated by his own friend. Jenkin acts as a savior for all others. Each one thinks that he has sent Jenkin to his death, and each one mourns deeply, using, in some cases, the very words, "He died for me." (p.495) The relation of this to the death of Christ for mankind is unmistakable. The deluded nature of the active, self-reproaching imagination and its role in grief is mildly satirised through the mourning of the characters like Rose, Gerard, Tamar and Ducane.

Although society does not do justice with the morally good figures like Jenkin yet her death proves beneficial for the society. Jenkin in *The Book and the Brotherhood* clearly upholds the "moral of responsibilities which is proven by Fourrez's remark, "Moving towards an ethics of responsibility may represent a step forward for individuals. Who thus, in an act of trust and hope, say, "This is what I might make of my life."<sup>16</sup>

Although Jenkin proved man of responsibilities yet the killing of Jenkin is evidence of the strong roots of evil in the world. Jenkin represents morality at both the private and public levels; as a person in a circle of friends, and as a member of society. Through him Murdoch gives the total moral picture. At the level of public and social morality Murdoch asserts the need for justice and the recognition of human rights for all human beings. Opposition between the individual and society may also come from the deterioration of the social system. Sometimes homosexuals are blamed for that which is untrue. Society considers homosexuality unethical. Anyone can be morally good. Following morals, values, and ethics is a part of human nature and completely depend on one's belief and individual selectivity. Individual and society are inter-dependent.

### **The Black Prince (1973)**

Murdoch's depiction of gay character clearly displayed her alertness about social treatment towards homosexuality and she was fully attentive about their sense of dissatisfaction about their sexuality which become a severe

cause of their isolation from the society. In her novel, *The Black Prince*, Francis, an important homosexual character, suggests the protagonist, Bradley to express his love to Juliun bravely. Francis himself is suffering from the pain of being lonely because of his homosexuality. He is highly unhappy about his condition. He expresses his pain to Bradley. "I am homosexual and I'm blood unhappy about it. Of course you don't know yourself, lucky old you. I just know myself too bloody well".<sup>17</sup> Francis wants to be free from the curse of homosexuality, which can't provide him true love and a peaceful life.

Through Francis, Murdoch highlights the problem of isolation of homosexuals. Due to their specific sexual identity, society is not ready to accept them and to give them their equality in their birth rights. y means and ends. "M.F. Moonzajer claims that, "Heterosexuality is the traditional way of expressing love and romance; the act of enjoyment between opposite sexes. It is not only for the purpose of enjoyment and pleasure, but also the human general survival. Whilst homosexuality is the freedom of enjoyment and pleasure from any means and ends."'<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Homosexuals are isolated by the society due to their unacceptable sexual orientation. This research of author's novels unveils social injustice done to them in many perspectives at personal, social, religious, marital, official, ethical level. As a result, they are proved helpless in their search for self and to gain moral aim of their existence or life. About the institution of marriage, here also sexuality is not the reason to guarantee about its stability. In religious context, homosexuality should not be considered as unethical sexual orientation of gay community. Murdoch claims them as "Crucified Christ Figures" waiting for enlighten liberty and recognition and equal human rights and tries to highlight one point without forgetting that Christ fought for right and right things only.

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